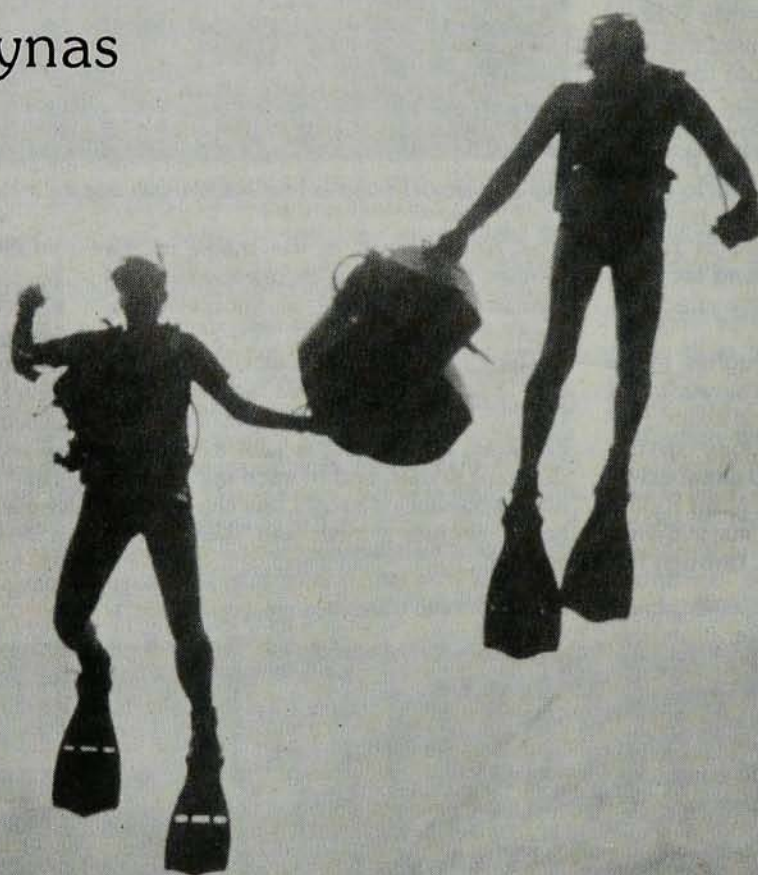


mako films

gentle giants and company

by edward lynas



John Stoneman's latest film features the biggest stars of all time — and they had a whale of a time making it! The following film review and production profile suggest that Canada is fast-becoming a leader in the field of underwater cinematography.

Somewhere near Tadoussac, while cruising up the St. Lawrence River last July, Edward Lynas (founder of the Ocean Research Information Society) completed his draft of the following film review, **Nomads Of The Deep**.

Former editor of *Dive Canada*, Lynas senses "a growing audience for the underwater film, and a like response among filmmakers... In California several producers are having special Panavision units built to record the 'wet look,' and Underwater Film Festivals are spouting like pumpkins across the continent."

Canada's contribution to the development of underwater cinematography is significant. In a special production profile, Dennis Rindsem explains how **Nomads Of The Deep** was shot, using the unique Imax camera system.

How does the Imax system differ from conventional 35mm? The film frame is ten times larger, as is the projection screen. Consequently, viewing audiences feel as if they are right on location and in the action.

Imax is the brainchild of design engineer Bill Shaw, and the Canadian-owned company, Imax Systems Corp. founded in 1967 by Roman Kroitor, Robert Kerr and Graeme Ferguson (president). The first Imax film was shown at Expo 1970 in Osaka, Japan.

Canada has two of the eleven Imax systems in the world: one at Ontario Place, Toronto; the other at Pyramid Place, Niagara Falls. As **Nomads Of The Deep** has proven, thanks to this Canadian invention, underwater cinematography will never be the same again.

Here in the St. Lawrence River, the whales are late this year. Still, now and then, one of the vanguard surfaces around my boat, making the long, waiting hours seem slight. Each time a whale appears, I am once again awed by its fluid power and beauty, and more acutely conscious of the almost impossible challenge of translating the experience on film.

Elsewhere, to the distant southwest, the whales are on time — they have been and gone. But fortunately, something of their Pacific passage was recorded by director/cinematographer John Stoneman, for his most recent film **Nomads Of The Deep**: a film that succeeds perhaps better than any other to date, in portraying the singular experience of being among living, breathing whales in open water. One particular sequence, in which a female Humpback whale and her calf display their affection for each other, is so charged with beauty, tenderness and sensitivity, it supersedes anything I have experienced in thousands of hours spent among whales. In this, and other se-

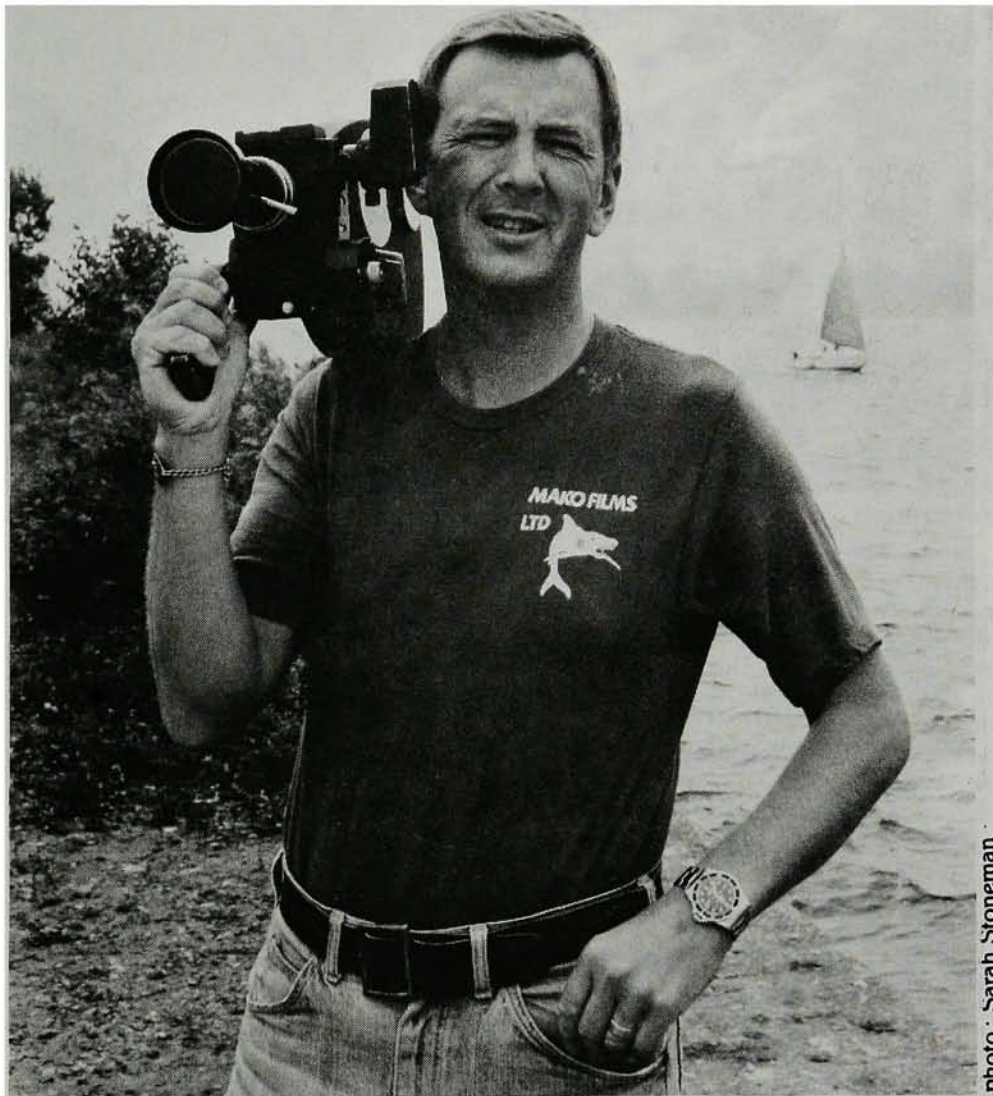


photo: Sarah Stoneman

John Stoneman, director/cinematographer for **Nomads Of The Deep**

quences the camera is integral to the action, the medium comes into its own, outdoing even reality.

Nomads Of The Deep is an impressive film on several counts, representing another step in the evolution of underwater filmmaking in North America. So powerful is its appeal that even lay audiences respond with the enthusiasm of devotees to the subject. Not only is the film indicative of Stoneman's growth as a filmmaker, it also represents a courageous move into an esoteric area on the part of Canadian producer, Mako Films Ltd.

Main locations for the film, ninety-five percent of which is shot beneath the surface, are the brilliant waters of the Red Sea, and the Hawaiian Islands — exotic enough locations, to be sure. Yet the film doesn't have to rely upon the stereotypical images these names evoke. Since the underwater visibility is from forty to

seventy metres, the audience sees all of the action: there is no need to fill in from imagination what might have been lacking in experience.

Stoneman is obviously determined to exploit the large-screen format (sixty by eighty feet), in order to achieve a maximum range of movement, while capitalizing on light, drama, and angle possibilities.

Nowhere is his purpose more evident, or better understood, than in the initial opening sequence. The viewer is immediately absorbed through the membrane of the lens, into the dimensions and immensity of liquid space: a space alive with being and form — the pulsating rhythm of existence further dramatized by interposing light, shade, and shadow with depth and colour.

The film is divisible into three segments, each with its own setting, rhythm, mood, and statement, and each a natural

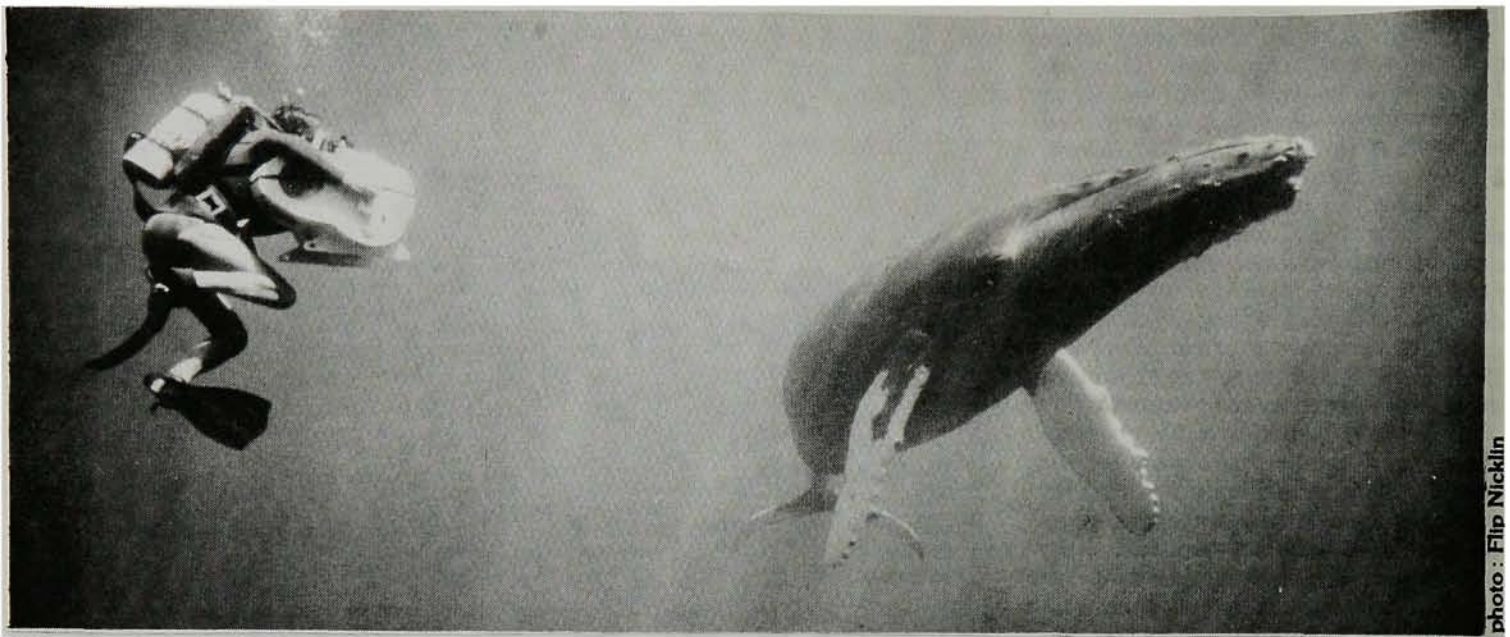


photo: Flip Nicklin

Follow that Humpback! Easier said than done for underwater cinematographer Chuck Nicklin with the 312 lb. Imax camera

element of the whole. In the first, Stoneman guides the viewer through the habitat of a reef — a fluid, embracing, somewhat erotic, certainly poetic world, populated by a multitude of life forms. They are sustained in this fragile ecosystem only through an intricate web of interdependence. Appropriately the canvas is broad, colourful and busy. Darkness and light are delicately balanced. The mood is quietly dramatic. Particular attention is given to the shot-sequences and camera angles, where a definite attempt is made to create a new, non-terrestrial experience that severs all land-connected consciousness.

Now the film enters the predatory world of the shark: an area of familiar ground for the audience — an area where, because of the nature of the animals, there are severe limits on what can be achieved with the film. Consequently, it is the least effective segment. Nevertheless, the crafting goes on; both background and mood are stark; drama is heightened; the colour is cold; the camera, moving erratically and aggressively, sweeps the vast expanse of blue. Here, above all, Stoneman is concerned with placing the shark (and other predators) in their proper context. His statement is most blatant, both verbally and visually, as camera and cameraman leave the safety of their cages to reach out to the sharks: an action which places the film crew at some risk, but emphasizes the point that what we least understand, we fear most.

Finally, the film enters its last and major segment, the world of the mind beneath the waters, the realm of the great whales. On a purely functional level, here is some of the most incredible wildlife footage

ever shot underwater: a mother and calf embracing in a uniquely intercut sequence; two whales engaged in mating behaviour; the elegant counter-suspended ballet of a singing whale; the inter-species rapport between film crew and subjects. It is a gentle, gigantic and intelligent canvas characterizing Stoneman's empathy with the mammals. The camera probes to record, understand, and interpret without being obtrusive. Instinctively, he understands when the mood, movement and pace belong to the whales, so he adds nothing — takes nothing away: an unmistakable sign of thorough crafting.

Nomads Of The Deep is a film frequently in contrast to the underwater film genre: a genre which can be grouped into three categories. First, is the 'documentation' or 'scientific' production a record or off-shoot (albeit a natural one) of some other exploratory or scientific purpose, where the film element is superseded by the primary objective. Second, is that of the 'commercial' production, intended for (and frequently sponsored by) the sport diving community, or the would-be sport diver. Generally, films of this type are well-photographed, tightly-edited works extolling the beauty and adventure of the world open to the underwater diver. Finally, there is the category of film which is a collection of footage held together by the fact that it is photographed underwater — in which a scene or segment of an otherwise 'normal' film is shot underwater.

In **Nomads Of The Deep**, Stoneman has set out to make a complete underwater film for its own sake — a characterization of his previous films, too — because he is a filmmaker who goes underwater for his subject matter, not a

diver or a scientist who has slipped into film. In previous films, he has added the elements of plot and drama. With this latest, he extends his scope by de-emphasizing the plot (which is thin and open-ended), and stressing, instead, what is best described as 'movement as an art form.' Perhaps because of improved equipment and working conditions, and the freedom that comes with growth and experience in the water medium, this latest film is his most successful. It has broad public appeal, and suffers only where it makes concessions to this design, end; namely in length and narration. But Stoneman's sensitivity fully compensates for this; he has managed to add another dimension to our understanding of that dimension to our understanding of marine life.

Here in the St. Lawrence at the conclusion of this review, the drafting of which has kept me for a time from my beloved whales, I am left with a feeling of optimism; for **Nomads Of The Deep** speaks to me of a filmmaker who cares — about his craft, his art, his audience, and especially about the total environment we share. Perhaps, as a result of that caring, and the eloquent expression of it in Stoneman's film, we will all begin to care enough... And there will be life in this river to wonder at for many summers to come.

d. John Stoneman **co.writer** Ted Woods **underwater ph.** Chuck Nicklin, John Stoneman **surface ph.** David Douglas **ed.** Toni Trow **asst. ed.** Yan Moore **sd. re-rec.** Paul Coombe **stills and lights** Flip Nicklin **scientific consultant** Dr. Roger Payne **m.** Mickey Erbe, Maribeth Solomon **p.** David Keighley **asst. to the p.** Peter Hayman **p. sec.** Sharon Buck **p.c.** Mako Films Ltd. **col.** 65mm Imax **running time** 20 min.